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ABSTRACT

Agencies funding early childhood education projects, policy analysts, and research consumers have created a demand for research tools generating data with applied reliability. This paper examines the focus group as a social science research tool which meets this demand. Part 1 defines a focus group as a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment; describes how the approach is used; and discusses advantages and limitations of its use. Part 2 describes two situations in which focus group methodologies were used. In the first example, a Project Advisory Committee, which was representative of Canadian geography and the early childhood constituency, organized five focus groups in different regions to identify the preferred format and theoretical basis for training materials. A delphi technique variation was used to corroborate the focus groups' results. In the second example, an Ontario (Canada) effort used focus groups to design new preservice programs for early childhood teachers which combined the best of diploma and degree programs and required the collaboration of community colleges, degree granting universities, and education faculties. There were political, marketing, and public relations advantages to having parents, board of education consultants, and early childhood personnel serving on focus groups to assist in developing this program. Part 3 presents a perspective about the role of research in policy development and describes a new policy initiative for early years curriculum development, following an extensive study into exemplary kindergarten practice. Contains 10 references. (KDFB)

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THREE APPROACHES FOR DEVELOPING TRAINING MATERIALS AND CURRICULUM POLICIES

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INTRODUCTION

A major challenge for researchers in this mid-90's is the issue of relevance. More and more agencies who fund projects, analysts who develop policy, research consumers are searching for either a theoretical or research foundation upon which to predicate their activities. This trend has created a demand for research tools that generate data with a 'common touch' or applied reliability. The use of focus groups for social science research fits this demand.

This paper has three parts. Part One will outline some of the theoretical perspectives about focus groups. In Part Two, situations which applied focus group methodologies will be described. The first is the use of focus groups as the primary approach to defining the framework for the development of a series of videotapes for childcare training. The second approach relates the use of focus group methodology to the development of an early childhood education program with tri-institutional collaboration. The third part of this paper presents a perspective about the role of research in policy development

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. It describes a new policy initiative for early years curriculum development which followed an extensive research study into exemplary kindergarten practice. This project involved many of the more traditional data gathering approaches as surveys, and observations. Nevertheless, the focus group methodology contributed a perspective which gave this study a particular validity for current policy development.

PART ONE: ABOUT FOCUS GROUPS

What is a focus group?

A focus group can be defined as a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non threatening environment. A focus group then is a socially oriented research technique to capture real-life data. (Kreuger, 1988). Focus groups also can provide a qualitative component to a larger study (Love, 1944).

The key words here are 'perceptions' and 'defined area of interest'. Focus groups can provide information about feelings, attitudes, beliefs of participants. The process allows the researcher a glimpse of a reality from the participants point of view.

How can this approach be used?

Focus groups are convened to generally last about out 90 minutes, although they may range from 1-2 hours. They are most effective with 8 and 12 participants.

Participants may be selected to represent a specific population of informants. They may also be randomly selected. Usually you will not want the people to know each other. If they do this could create an 'underground hierarchy'.

The setting is for the group meeting is important. It should relax the participants and promote interaction. It should also expedite the session recording either be electronic means as video or audio tapes, or personal note-taking.

The facilitator or moderator leads the group through a structured interview, controlling the pacing, tone, and turn-taking. Moderators must be careful not to inject their own points of view. While being at ease with public speaking, a good moderator is also a good listener who can establish rapport with a group. Moderators should try to make the session look and feel informal and relaxed, yet stay within the structure. Some might use the 'funnel' technique, moving from general to specific questions. Sometimes 'closed-end probes ' will be used to confirm that the moderator understood the comment of a participant.

What are some advantages and limitations?

Used in a social environment, the focus group strategy can

* have high face validity
* offer speedy results
* be very cost effective
* give details concerning issues
* present different viewpoints on issues

* provide a sense of the range of likely responses to an issue
* explore issues prior to doing other quantitative research
* help explain quantitative research

Focus groups are most valid if they are used carefully for a clearly defined issue or problem. Like any other research tool, the focus group must really be able to measure, or collect data on what it proposed to measure or gather data about.

Limitations include having less control over information received than individual interviews and having data that can be difficult to analyze. Focus groups can be difficult to assemble, differences between groups can be troublesome. Furthermore, the selected participants may not be accurately representative.

Focus group facilitators require special skills as do recorders. The discussion must be conducted with some degree of anonymity, and confidentiality in an environment conducive to expressing opinions. A problem may arise when some participants who represent minor constituencies dominate the discussion.

Analysis can be time consuming and thus costly. Focus group results cannot be properly generalized to a population as a whole as they tend to be suggestive and revealing of trends or patterns rather than being statistically relevant.

Organization and preparation are cornerstones to overcoming these limitations and high;lighting the advantages possible with the focus group methodology. As with any research project, the purpose of the group should be clearly defined. Questions and issues to be studied should be mapped like script preparation. Skillful facilitators can add to the value of any project using the focus group procedure.

All focus groups can suffer group dynamic problems. The moderator must establish the ground rules, tolerate silence, and be ready to shift when a topic seems exhausted.

How can focus group data be used?

This is when the researcher becomes the detective, looking for trends and patterns that occur across the various groups. Both the moderator and recorder should make notes on observations and impressions at the end of the session.

The analysis process begins with getting an overview of the total picture: finding the 'big' ideas, recurring themes, new insights. The typical analysis relies on analysis of detailed transcripts of discussions and their conclusions as identified by the participants, moderator and recorder. Categorizing and tabulating the kinds and frequency of responses can be significant.

Although more in-depth analyses of discussion content is possible, this may demand considerable technical skill and experience. Sometimes a secondary

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review by the original participants of summarized and codified data can confirm the trends or patterns of the discussions. The video project described later in this paper used this approach, referred to as a variation of a 'delphi' technique.

PART TWO: USING FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGIES

a. Early Childhood Training Materials

A few years ago, the federal government of Canada made some funds available for childcare research and development. One of the thrusts identified in the prospectus for funding applicants was training materials. There was little else in the way of specifications, other than the materials must be bilingual and have national appeal.

At this time I beam involved with a group who submitted and received project funds for a project to create a set of three videotapes for childcare training.

At the beginning were the questions. What kinds of training materials? For what consumer population? What format? With what philosophical perspective? What content and scope?

Some of the fundamental questions were answered by a Project Advisory Committee, representative of the Canadian geography and the early childhood constituency: community college trainers, program directors,

representatives of national organizations involved in childcare advocacy, support and program evaluation.

This Advisory group provided the initial project direction. What materials? A set of videos. For what consumer population? Those beginning their early childhood professional education whether in a one, two or four year program. What format? Certainly there was a consensus that the materials should provoke problem solving and be as interactive as possible. What philosophical perspective? Here again, there was unanimity among the members of the Advisory Committee. Health and safety issues had to be paramount. Footage must children in real situations. In Canada this meant bilingual programs and footage of a multi-cultural child population. There was also consensus in the Advisory Committee that the curriculum message must emphasize the value of play, with supportive and facilitative rather than 'instructional' adults.

This was a beginning. Yet there were still many unanswered questions. Furthermore, the project required a 'needs assessment' strategy. We had to justify not only that our plans to develop training materials reflected the true needs of the early childhood community across Canada, but also that the development process created the market for the finished products. No mean task!

An investigation of potential methodologies against the background of money and time resources led to the decision to use a focus group methodology. Five focus groups would be organized in different regions of

the country . Participants would represent the key constituencies in those regions as well as the bilingual and native populations of Canada. Training institutions and agencies would host these meetings where feasible to minimize costs. Participants would not be paid nor reimbursed for expenses, unless there were unusual circumstances. The subsequent organization followed the guidelines identified in Part One:

* the invitation letter clearly described the purpose of the project, the objectives and format for the focus group sessions

* the facilitator was the same for all sessions

* the session 'script' with key questions was the same for all sessions

Of course it was costly. In Canada, the air fare from Ottawa to the coast is nearly as much as from Toronto to Portugal. In some cases, travel expenses for participants were also covered. Snow storms tried to interfere in the Maritimes but did not succeed: a tribute to the dedication of early childhood personnel and their support for the project. Sessions were taped and later transcribed by a project assistant.

Yes, the trends were generally consistent in all sessions. There was a clearly identified need for training materials that reflected the realities of Canadian childcare. The video format was preferred to text only. However, the focus group participants wanted related text materials to support the videos, give directions and scenarios for their use, suggestions for follow-up activities. There was strong support for the problem solving, interactive format and the underlying philosophy with a play or discovery learning emphasis. But the

focus group data also revealed many preferences, needs, even requests which had not been identified by the Advisory Group.

How to proceed? Was the project team justified in proceeding with its version, or interpretation of most suitable content, and scope? There was some anxiety. Consequently a follow-up to the focus group methodology was implemented.

A questionnaire was prepared from the patterns of responses from the focus groups. This was then sent to each individual focus group member . On the questionnaire they were asked to rank the items. This was the 'delphi' technique variation. Its use added an extra quantitative dimension to the data gathering, and made the focus group results even more focused.

Once this analysis was done by research assistants on the project team, production could proceed. The resulting series of three videos Childcare in Action was made available to organizations and programs across the country The format and organization was predicated on the following:

* natural scenes of real children in real programs, including those for Native and bilingual or French speaking children

* typical scenes that might be found in any childcare: arrival and departure, hand washing, toy sharing, story time routines

* multicultural populations of children using a range of culturally sensitive materials

* special situations: the sick child

* curriculum variations - arts and crafts, sand and water play, group times

* supporting text materials which described each vignette or scenario on the video and offered some questions for discussion and follow up activities

* packaging which included the text and video, with both in French and English in the same set

* scenes of childcare personnel meeting with parents and other staff

* each video had a set of naturalistic vignettes, without voice-overs, or commentary so that the consumers could mix and match and use as they chose

* easy accessibility, low or no cost to consumers

(NOTE- a quantity of the video sets was made available free of charge funded by Health and Welfare Canada and distributed by the Canadian Childcare Federation)

The focus group informants certainly gave a clear direction to this project. They also became the best customers, providing the project team with wonderful publicity.

Did the focus groups provide information, perspectives, recommendations that were not useful for this project? Of course. Focus group discussions can generate much more information than a project, or researcher can use or even require. In our case, there was a clear trend for materials related to childcare provisions for infants and toddlers The Advisory Committee that determined that such materials were beyond the scope and intent of this particular project. But future training materials? Another team did just that: developed a set of videos about infant and toddler care and education, applicable to group programs and private home childcare.

For this project, the adaptation of the focus group methodology with the addition of the survey' or 'delphi' technique gave the project additional validity, credibility, and publicity. The focus group participants developed a degree of 'ownership' over the project results, the set of videotapes.

B. Teacher Education

In Ontario there is a frustrating dichotomy about training and certification of educators working with young children. The Ontario anomaly is that teachers may be certificated for the education system without having any early childhood education training or experience either in their undergraduate degree program or in their post-graduate one year teacher training course. They may subsequently be assigned to kindergarten programs under the auspices of boards of education.

The childcare situation is different. There are different training opportunities and certification procedures. The legislation requires one program staff person per group of children to have a diploma (two years of training) or the equivalent. They do not need to have an undergraduate degree.

A few years ago the then Minister of Education charged the newly formed Teacher Education Council with the tasks of 'fixing' this situation. In typical bureaucratic fashion, an Advisory Committee and Project Work group were created. The fix was to be the design and subsequent implementation of a new pre-service program for teachers of young children that could blend the best of present diploma and degree programs, and require the collaboration

of three types of institutions: community colleges, degree granting universities, faculties of education.

As a member of the work team of three, I can guarantee that many ideas had a clear consensus on the following:

- a new integrated training program was definitely needed in Ontario. There was much research to support the need for specialized training for teachers who work with young children
- the institutions were ready to collaborate
- the program should be ecological in scope and content organization
- child development would be a content priority
- a related field education component should be crucial piece of the program
- the end product should be a 'collection' of certifications so that graduates would be eligible to work in either the education or social service system
- some legislative changes might be possible

The work team was ready to work and the socio-political climate seemed accepting. However, there were politicians, ministry, institutional and school board officials who might need persuasion to either accept, endorse, approve, fund, even implement any new program. In the best bureaucratic fashion it was proposed by the work team and approved by the project Advisory Committee that a 'consultation' process was important. This meant focus groups.

For this project, the purpose for using the focus group methodology was very different from the previously described project. This time the groups would

be convened so that the names of the participants and the constituencies they represented would appear in the project report. This meant that the decision to use the focus group methodology was primarily political rather than for research data.

The literature was superficially reviewed to identify the key advantages and disadvantages of the focus group approach. The variations were as follows:

* the work team would facilitate the group sessions to save the cost of outside consultants or facilitators

* the agenda would be tightly structured around a few key questions so that any data analysis could be simplified

* each group would have the same number - a representative balance of participants; a parent, board of education consultant, early childhood teacher educator, program or agency director.

The data analysis was easy because for this project the purpose of using the focus group methodology was for marketing, a political agenda and public relations. Statistical analysis of discussion trends was not done. Of course, there was a clear consensus from all of the participants in all three of the focus group sessions because the participants were selected to be sure that happened. The clear consensus of the focus group discussions matched that of the Advisory Committee and Work Team:

• specialized training for teachers who worked with children of kindergarten age was necessary because none of the present programs offered the broad certifications that could result and be useful for both boards of

education and programs licensed by the Ministry of Community and Social Services

- this training should prioritize child development and related early years field education experiences in both systems
- the program must result in an undergraduate degree to not undermine the credibility of current teachers in the education system as well as have the potential improve the status and career opportunities for other early childhood educators
- tri-institutional collaboration in the design and delivery was the most credible and feasible plan as funds for new programs at either the college, graduate or undergraduate levels were difficult to obtain with further cuts expected.

While not totally significant to the content and purpose of this paper and conference presentation, the results of this project are interesting. A publication Teachers of Young Children was prepared by the Work Group, supported with much approval by the project Advisory Committee and presented to the involved institutions as the Ministries of Education and Community and Social Services. The involved institutions proceeded to discuss the implications of the recommendations and consider the relevance to their present status and economic resources. The last two words offer the major clue about what happened. Nothing! To date the discussion continues, the legislation and certification requirements remain unchanged. Ontario early childhood teacher trainers and educators continue to lament about the situation. And...Ontario now has a new political party in power.

PART THREE - RESEARCH AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT

As early childhood researchers, we may often wish that our work had more societal applicability. This could be in many forms: improving professional strategies and practice, changing public attitudes and expectations, affecting policies or policy development, or program design, implementation and evaluation, personnel training and certification. However. on the current policy front research findings must compete with ecological approaches, and the interaction of political, fiscal, social, and ideological agendas. Underling policy development and implementation is the way options are presented and decisions are prioritized.

The field of early childhood education requires, invites, demands and advocates for quality programs for children and families. Inter and intra-national research can be found to support, or dispute many policy options. What then can influence the more positive applications of early childhood education research?

In reality, some of these theoretical philosophies about the nature of policy development have little influence. A major question then is how to find effective ways to have research influence policy, particularly policies which impact positively and effectively in the short and long term on young children, their families and the programs and services that exist for them.

No one will refute that statistics matter. Politicians love to quote figures for it makes them seem knowledgeable and informed. The timing of the project and the dissemination of findings is crucial. There is the 'marketing' that project authors and researchers should undertake. Networking helps. The status,

credibility and visibility of the researchers and the research contributes as well as the timing.

In Ontario during 1995-6, the issues about the availability and value of kindergarten programs was paramount. A previous government had mandated that all boards of education must provide junior kindergarten access by September 1997. Funds were made available for pilot projects which linked school-based childcare and kindergarten programs. Other funds were 'in the works' for collaboration with training. A new provincial curriculum document , The Common Curriculum was being implemented. Many Boards of Education were doing this and extending their initiatives about outcome-based education. The early childhood community became optimistic, even while recognizing that these programs and services would be costly . During this time the public was vociferously protesting present tax levels and the size of the government deficit.

Then a new Conservative government was elected. Panic in the early childhood community! Cuts to grants, programs development, new projects, subsidies were promised, and announced immediately. What could be rescued and how?

What research ammunition was available? How could it be used? With whom? For what results? The community of practitioners, advocates, parents, became polarized and confrontational each seeking priority consideration for its key issues.
This was the context for the project to develop a set of outcomes for kindergartens!

Who won? Hopefully the children will! However, here is what happened. with some reasons offered.

The new government didn't want to be the 'bad guys' particularly when a plethora of committee reports, research studies, key-note speakers, and the media major columnists and editors had endorsed the value of quality early childhood programs, including childcare, within the previous year. Furthermore, the Boards of Education across the province had committed millions, even billions towards the development of programs, environments, supplies, curriculum materials and staff. To stop some of this momentum meant lost money, and even potentially lost revenue. Politicians also like to be able to identify something short-term, concrete and influential as evidence of their accomplishments.

Junior kindergarten programs became 'local options'. Teacher training would remain in a ';status quo' situation until a new College of Teachers was set up. The kindergarten policy development would be 're-structured' and down-sized'

As a member of a Ministry of Education writing team for the policy statement of kindergarten outcomes, we began. What resources did we have? Of course there were already many documents with outcome statements Ontario Boards had begun, or even completed. The Common Curriculum was in use. The Premier's Council of the previous government had undertaken a major examination of research related broadly to social services and early

education, and that report had to be acknowledged. There was the research study funded by the Ministry of Education itself, What Makes Exemplary Kindergartens Effective?

A policy document: The KIndergarten Years was prepared that identified outcomes in the areas of language and literacy, mathematics, science and technology, the arts, and self and social development. (an attachment to this paper contains an abstract of the exemplary kindergarten study and a summary of some of the outcomes.)

Did the research make a difference to the writing of this policy? Yes, definitely !
A brief discussion of some of the elements that made this happen might help other researchers to have the result of their work become more influential and applied.

People. The early educators on the policy writing team all had strong academic backgrounds, had been involved in published research projects and were currently involved in nurturing action research with employed teachers of their respective Boards or institutions. They were knowledgeable about results of research from the High/Scope foundation and the Canadian Institute of Advanced Research. They valued presenting substantial rationales to their administrators, teachers for whom they did workshops, resourcing and individual consultations as well as to the governing trustees of the school board. The project leader had been seconded from a local Board of Education and while not an early childhood educator or even researcher

herself, she provided the liaison within the Ministry and kept the bureaucrats and the Minister happy with regular reports.

The timing of this project was interesting. The new government wanted to release something substantial to the education community within its first year in office. This will be done as the Kindergarten Years will be released in September, 1996.

Content had appeal. Educators, and researchers are too often accused of 'babblegab', or 'bureaucratese. In other words too many government publications are considered impractical or incomprehensible. The writing team was most cognizant of the present status of the field: what teachers, principals and consultants were doing and initiating and the receptivity to any more 'paper work'. The outcomes were written to be clear, concise, understandable and use-friendly.

This does not seem like a case-book description of policy development and the role of research. It nevertheless happened this way and at this stage if feels like a little success story. Perhaps as researchers we need to carefully think about the applicability of our work: the target consumer, the life span, and the political relevance of what we do as much as we think about other aspects of a project.

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